Chapter 15
Ethics, Agency, and Non-Human Agency in the Study of the Communicative Constitution of Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter interrogates how recent CCO (communication constitutes organizing) theorizing impacts the study of organizational ethics. Beginning with existing approaches, the chapter addresses how the complexity of analyzing choice and agency (typically tied to ethics) at an organizational level helps explain the relative lack of organizational ethics research. Ethics research in areas connected to organizational communication (public relations, crisis communication, corporate social responsibility, and organizational rhetoric) are also specifically examined. Next, the chapter considers the two distinct definitions of agency, from to the Montreal School's CCO approach and the Four Flows approach respectively, delves into a theoretical discussion of each definition's implications, and concludes that the Montreal School's CCO approach is more suited to investigating and questioning organizational ethics. The chapter concludes by noting paths for organizational research on ethics and responsibility, including challenging assumptions that moral thinking prioritizes rational choice.

INTRODUCTION

When will we wake up? Such is the famous question that Charles Redding asked at the 1990 NCA communication ethics conference. He argued that with few exceptions, we as scholars and researchers were oblivious to "the ethical dimension of organizational communication" (1996, p. 18). Perusing a communication research database, some 26 years later, searching for peer reviewed pieces on ethics, generates 11,000 articles. Sounds great, right? But when you add organization and communication to the general search terms in that database, that number quickly whittles down to 523 articles in the entire

database. We might conclude that only about 5% of the pieces on ethics in the communication research database are ones addressing organizational communication. In the 1990s, when Redding did a similar analysis of the focus on ethics in what was then the Com Abstracts database, he too came up with 5%. Today, a database search for ethics AND organizational communication from 1979-1995 produces 21 peer reviewed articles, whereas 1996-2016 generates a list of 98 peer reviewed pieces. Organizational scholars may also turn to a recent Handbook of Communication Ethics authored by three organizational communication scholars (Cheney, May, & Munshi, 2011) or they might consider Seeger's research and writing on organizational ethics over the past twenty years (e.g., 1997).

Thus, as a group of organizational communication scholars, we have done more to focus on ethics. We are publishing more (3X more) journal research that explicitly addresses ethics than we were the last time this conference was held. Is it enough to answer Charles Redding's (1996) call for org com scholars to "wake up" to the importance of ethics in our theorizing and research? Perhaps, but there is certainly room for a greater awakening. Part of what I found to be interesting was that when I downloaded the abstracts of those 98 pieces, a majority of them focus specifically on ethics in journalism and public relations. We also have a large increase in research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) that has generated handbooks (e.g., Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2013; May, Cheney, & Roper, 2007), special issue forums (e.g., Roper & Barker, 2011) and separate textbooks (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2011). The focus on journalism, public relations, and CSR makes sense in that these are areas that seek to apply and sometimes codify ethics in daily practice. It is also true that Cheney's (2004) article on bringing ethics in from the margins, focused primarily on case studies and practical applications of ethics as the way to bring greater student and scholarly attention to ethics in organizational communication. Practicality is great, but I want to turn our attention today to some of the ethics involved in our theorizing of organizations and the communicative action that constitutes them.

This chapter specifically addresses issues of ethics and agency in organizing. Organizational research has been increasingly attending to issues of agency (e.g., Brummans, 2006, 2015) alongside the growing interest in Communication as Constitutive of Organization (CCO) approaches to organizing (See Putnam & Nicotera, 2008; Robichaud & Cooren, 2013; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Given this theoretical context, I want to consider--how does agency relate to organizational ethics and what are the ethical consequences of our scholarly conceptualizations of agency?

What is ethics at its heart? When distinctions are made between morals and ethics, ethics is generally addressed as the systematic study of principles of right and wrong. Morals represent the context and culturally specific principles deemed relevant in a given situation. Yet, in practice, society often uses the words interchangeably. "Was s/he acting ethically?" is perhaps more likely to be heard in conversation than "Was s/he acting morally?" Regardless of the word used, the question assumes that the person is responsible for the act, that is, that they had some choice in the matter. Thus, I begin this theoretical exploration with a consideration of choice.

Choice in Ethics

"If we have little or no opportunity for conscious free choice in our behavior, if we feel compelled to do or say something because we are forced or coerced, matters of ethics usually are seen as minimally relevant to our actions" (Johannesen, Valde, Whedbee, 2008, p. 1).

Choice is key to ethics, and I argue that this connection is a key reason why issues of organizational ethics and responsibility are so challenging and under-addressed in our scholarship. How one tackles

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